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CIVIL GOVERNMENT
AN ORDINANCE OF GOD.

A SERMON.

Delivered in the 1st Congregational Church, Colchester, Conn.,

By L. CURTIS.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

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Civil Government an ordinance of God:

A SERMON,

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APRIL 21st, 1861,

L. Curtis
BY L. CURTIS.



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COLCHESTER, April 22, 1861.

To our Pastor, Rev. L. Curtis :

DEAR SIR :—Cordially approving the sentiments contained in your Discourse of Sunday morning, April 21st., and desiring its spirit to be more widely disseminated, we hereby request a copy for publication.

Yours, very truly,

EBENEZER CARPENTER,
HORACE SMITH,
M. STORRS,
R. B. GWYLLIM,
S. A. STEBBINS,
J. T. ASHTON,
and forty others.

COLCHESTER, April 24, 1861.

MESSRS. EBENEZER CARPENTER, HORACE SMITH, M. STORRS, R. B. GWYLLIM, S. A. STEBBINS, J. T. ASHTON, &c. :—

GENTLEMEN :—The Discourse which you request for publication was very hastily prepared, and it has no especial merit but that of plain truth plainly spoken. Our present perils lend to it all the interest it can have. But if you think it may contribute to form more just views of our Civil Government, or to inspire a true Christian patriotism for its defense and maintainance, it is at your disposal.

Yours, respectfully,

L. CURTIS.

S E R M O N .

Rom. xiii. 4.—“ *For he is the minister of God to thee for good : but if thou do that which is evil, be afraid ; for he beareth not the sword in vain : for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*”

There are three institutions which are the foundation of human society; the Family, the State and the Church. They all exist by divine appointment. They are all essential to the existence of any society in which life is a blessing. From the Family spring the elements of life and power in the State. The State is the shelter of the Family; while the Church would elevate and vitalize both, with the love of God and man, and faith in eternal realities. The text speaks of *Civil Government*, or of the Chief Magistrate, who stands as its representative. “He is the minister of God to thee for good.” It is an institution designed for the benefit of those who live under it,—to secure their rights and guard their interests ; to throw its protection over every family and over all the interests of society.

And not only is Civil Government designed for the good of all:—it is the *appointment of God* to secure it.

The magistrate is His minister, God's own agent to promote it. The ruling power does not act merely in the name, and for the people. He is also the agent of God, officiating by divine appointment. Hence, Civil Government is not merely man's institution ;—it is an *ordinance of God*.

The other thought of the text is: God gives his own sanction to the punishment of evil-doers. "If thou doest that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.—" By "him that doeth evil" is here meant one that breaks the laws, or resists the authority of Civil Government. And by "revenger to execute wrath," is meant, the officer of justice, the agent both of man and of God to inflict righteous punishment upon the transgressor. And he must not bear the sword in vain—that symbol of authority and of justice must not be an empty name. It must come down upon the transgressor.

The inference from these facts is, that obedience to the magistrate is both a necessity and a duty. "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake," ye *must obey*, for the magistrate may rightfully compel obedience by the sword; and God also commands it.

Paul, in this chapter, was evidently addressing some professing to be Christians, who lived under the Roman Government, and yet refused to obey its authority. They wanted to throw off that Government and deny its claims. They refused to pay tribute or revenue into

its treasury. All this resistance to civil authority Paul condemned. It was wrong. It deserved the rebuke he gave it. He would not encourage fanaticism or rebellion, even among those who lived under Nero. He was a law-and-order man. He would, as a good citizen, obey and honor the government of the empire, *except when it commanded him to do what God had forbidden, or forbid him to do what God had commanded.* And this he would enjoin upon all Christians, and upon all men, because the highest authority, the Most High, commands obedience to the authority of the State.

Here is a lesson for our times. In the providence of God, we are brought face to face with realities which impress us with the grave importance of these truths;—*the sacredness that belongs to Civil Government; and the divine sanction it has to vindicate its claims to loyal obedience.*

1st.—There is a *sacredness* which belongs to Civil Government.

It is too common to regard Government as a mere matter of convenience, the creature of human will, and of circumstances. It is indeed left to men to determine the *form* of government according to circumstances; to elect their rulers or make them hereditary; to make laws and unmake them; and to put into legislative enactments a thousand things which are temporary and local. But because there is this discretion concerning forms and modes, many seem to infer that Government itself is a mere matter of discretion and

prudence, with nothing sacred or inviolable belonging to it. It is a false and fatal influence. Because there have been different forms of trial, and different ways of awarding justice between man and man,—sometimes by arbitration, sometimes by judges on the bench; sometimes with a jury and sometimes without; shall we infer that *justice* itself is a matter of discretion and convenience; that it is no more sacred than the forms in which it is administered?

By no means. Under whatever form or mode of administration, Justice is *one*. It must be the aim and end of all judicial proceedings. It is fundamental. It is a principle of the Divine Government. It is an attribute of God's eternal nature. No man, no body of men may trifle with it.

So Civil Government, whatever its form, Imperial, Monarchial, Republican—has *ends* to reach which are sacred as Justice; which are essential to the very existence of society. And to secure these ends, Civil Government is ordained of God. There is no discretionary power in *this* matter. These ends are high and sacred; above all forms and policy; above all party issues or personal interests. And Civil Government is indispensable to secure them. While it aims to secure them, while it is capable of securing them, in the legitimate use of its power and authority, every citizen should swear allegiance to it, and stand up, unflinching, for its maintenance. What desecration to regard such an ordinance of God, as a mere toy to play with; as a chess-board for political games; or as a machinery for personal ends or party purposes! It is a monstrous

perversion of one of the most sacred trusts ever committed to man. And the man who lifts his hand against it, makes war upon Jehovah, and upon Humanity !

And remember, too, the many and precious interests it is set to foster and to guard. What an educator it is of the conscience. Its body of laws, based upon natural justice, embodying the wisdom of ages, and enforced with solemn forms and sanctions, gives clearer thoughts and deeper sentiments of justice, and a keener sense of obligation. It is a healthy restraint upon the evil in our lawless nature. It braces up every noble and patriotic sentiment. It puts the hand of power upon the evil-doer, compelling him to respect the rights of other men. It throws its broad shield over each individual of the State. It joins millions of hands, it points millions of bayonets, if need be ; it holds the entire power of the State pledged to protect the rights and to redress the injuries of the weakest and the humblest citizen. Every family rests under its shelter. Every individual pursues his calling, secure of the reward of his own labor. All the arts of peace flourish under its guardianship at home, while abroad, our Commerce floats secure under its flag, as if the nation's right arm was stretched out over all the oceans to the farthest sea.

Thus our National Government, as strong and vigorous, as just and insisting upon justice, has not only encouraged and protected every interest at home, but has given to the American citizen his passport among all civilized nations, and like the Roman citizen of old, he has felt secure from encroachment and insult by the

simple declaration : “ *I am a CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES.* ”

And how many are the recollections and associations of a national character, that have become historic, that have been gathering in the course of our history from the landing on Plymouth Rock, and the mustering of our armies around Washington, and the firm establishment of our free government, down to the present year. There is a wealth of historic memories even for our young nation which is the heritage of every patriot in the land. And it ought to bind us together as one family by the most tender and sacred ties ; for all over our country we can say and feel : “ What noble men our fathers were ; how blessed the heritage they left us ! ” It is not yet a century since we started as an independent nation. It is not two centuries and a half since the May-flower came. But from then till now, with all our trials, how richly has the God of our fathers blessed us. Since the Revolution, with the exception of a brief period, the war of 1812, we have had unparalleled prosperity. The blessings of good government have abounded, and they have come so easily, so quietly that we have not realized any pressure from the strong, paternal arm that has been around us for protection. Our own Government, founded upon a Constitution which the world has honored, and by sacrifices which the world has admired, we believe to be an ordinance of God. It may have human imperfections, but it has the divine sanction. The God of nations raised up the men who founded it, and who gave all that was dear to them

for its defense. They looked to Him when they put their hands to this work. He imbued them with his own wisdom, He upheld them with his right arm. And who can doubt, that now, we ought to take this heritage to our hearts as the gift of God and of our fathers, and as the depository of all our hopes and interests as a nation ; that we ought to defend and hold it sacred almost as the “Ark of the Covenant,” and putting forth no rash hand to modify or change it, to transmit it inviolate to those who shall come after us?

2nd.—The other great truth taught in the text is this: *Civil Government has divine sanction to enforce obedience to its laws.*

I need not add one word to show that this is the plain meaning of this passage. I know there are cases where resistance and revolution are to be justified. But they are very rare. The Government must be perverted to unlawful ends. It must be oppressive. It must fail to answer its object, and it must be incapable of reform or restoration by peaceful and constitutional modes, before this dangerous and violent remedy is to be applied. But in the case of our Government, none of these things are true. Not a citizen is oppressed. Not a provision of our great Charter has been violated. Whatever wrongs individuals may have committed against the rights of any, our *Government* is not implicated, and it stands ready to-day, as it ever has, to secure every guaranty of the Constitution. It has not been perverted to unlawful ends. It has no desire to encroach upon the rights of any state, or of any citizen of

our Confederacy. The Constitution, in its letter and its spirit, is to-day what our fathers made it. It has proved a blessing to all our people, and if faithfully observed, it is ample for the protection of all the interests it was made to guard. And, certainly, if Paul, by divine authority, declared it the duty of men to be subject to the despotic government of *Nero*, it is the duty of American citizens to obey the best government on earth. If the Roman Government was *then* authorized to enforce its authority against law-breakers and conspirators, our own Government has the right to do it *now*. If those who resisted the powers that *then* were, resisted the ordinance of God, the same must be true of those who now resist the supreme authority of this nation. If *those*, deserved righteous punishment, *these* ought not to escape. The supreme authority of this nation must not be trampled with impunity.—It is a blow at all our rights and interests and at every safeguard for them. A good government must be strong, vigorous, stable. One that is weak, shifting, revolutionary, like that of Mexico, is ruinous to any people. Every upstart chieftain, every disaffected or ambitious man, has power to embroil and desolate a nation. You know not who will usurp it to-morrow, or what exactions it will make, or what vengeance it will inflict. Property, life, every interest is insecure, unless Civil Government be planted as upon a rock, and be maintained against all opposition, in fact, as well as in theory, “a terror to evil doers.” There must be subjection to it. It must lay its hand upon the transgressor with an energy that none shall resist.

It must *maintain* its authority, to have the *right* to live. And when its authority is defiantly and successfully trampled, it is dead. It ceases to fulfil its end. The whole fabric crumbles to the earth and we are shelterless. Every storm of popular violence may beat upon us. Every wave of passion may sweep over us, till pelted and drifted hither and thither, defenceless and desolate, we are tired of life.

There has long been a tendency in our country to push the idea of individual sovereignty and independence almost to the verge of lawlessness. We will not here inquire the cause. It is a fact too evident, and likely to prove fatal, unless speedily we correct this tendency. It is the extreme opposite to that which existed in the Spartan and in other ancient governments. *Then*, the individual was but a machine, an instrument of the state; existing only for the state. All his rights and interests were swallowed up by the state. But here the state is swallowed up by the individual. The will of the individual is grown imperious, dictatorial, and defiant toward the supreme authority of the state. He claims an independence which is irresponsible and lawless. The most sacred of political compacts are recklessly broken. A senator, representing a certain state, upon the floor of the U. S. Senate, sworn to obey and maintain the constitution of his country, holding his place on that floor only by virtue of that constitution, boldly avows that he owes "*no allegiance* to the Government of the United States." This fatal heresy, started and propagated on the soil of a southern state, by a disappointed, ambitious man, has for more

than a generation, been taking deeper root, and spreading wider and growing higher, till, like a great poisonous tree, it overshadows the land. Its breath corrupts the political atmosphere. It dissolves all political integrity and eats away all the foundations of national authority and power. If it triumphs we fall into the bottomless pit of anarchy. It is inevitable. The principle is fatal to all government. It ought to have been met and crushed long ago. But the favorable moment has passed. And now after asserting itself defiantly for years at the Capitol of our nation; after secret plottings and deep-laid conspiracies, it has grown at length to a fearful embodiment in "The Confederate States." It stands forth in open day, arrogant, cruel and defiant; determined to measure its strength with our Government, to march upon our Capitol, and to usurp the government it has sworn to obey and defend. No! It aims with vandal spirit to *destroy* it, and to erect upon the ruins *another* government, framed by some conventionists; with a constitution never submitted to the people for their assent; forced upon them by a blind madness and haste, and by the propogation of every false and artful rumor that can misrepresent the National Government, and inflame every evil passion against it. The whole scheme, though half-suspected by many, has taken us by surprise. We are not prepared for it. We are appalled by its magnitude, and by the bold desperation with which it clutches at the whole power, at the very Capitol and archives of the nation, and at all our blood-bought liberties.

We have just seen that, because in mere self-defense,

our Government would peaceably provision its own starving soldiers, those brave, immortal men of Sumpter, its own fortress, they battered and burnt them out, took possession of the fortress and *struck down the flag of our country!* Yes, struck down in disgrace that glorious symbol of the nation's authority and power; the representative symbol of all our rights and liberties; the symbol of national justice and law, and freedom and glory: that flag which waved over Washington and the brave armies that rallied around him in defence of our common country; which our veteran soldiers, who fought under it, cannot look upon without tears; which has waved over all the seas, loved by the American sailor and traveler as their sure protection and the pride of their hearts, saluted and honored the world over!

And in place of it, they have raised another flag, the symbol of another government, and for the first time in the history of the World, now in this nineteenth century, they have laid for its chief "corner stone," not Justice and Liberty, but SLAVERY—that institution which the most despotic nations are sweeping from their limits as a curse, and which is condemned by the Christian sentiment of the civilized world! And the flag of that Confederacy, red with the blood of Liberty, is to-day flouting its folds of treason towards Washington. The conspirators are already coming up near the grave of Mount Vernon, not as reverent pilgrims, but to desecrate and destroy the work to which Washington gave his life. They are coming to thunder at the gates of the Capitol, demanding the keys of govern-

ment, the archives of the nation, and the submission of the people to the will of traitors! What began in secession and anarchy, is already ripened into despotism. It was enough that the conspirators should have put lawless hands on our nation's defences and property. It was more than enough that they should send commissioners to our outraged Government, demanding its sanction of the treason, and a distribution of the stolen property, *equitably*, and then to take the piratical Confederacy by the hand, welcoming it to the dignity of national sovereignty and to the sisterhood of civilized nations. But *now*, when they press hard upon Washington, to overthrow the entire government, to drive the ploughshare over all that we venerate in the achievements of our fathers, and to put the heel of despotism upon a Republican people, for one I would rather die than submit! It cannot be! In the name of justice and law; by all the memories of our fathers; in the name of the God of Battles, we'll never suffer it! It may cost us sacrifices. What is money, what is life in such a cause? We'll never crown this master-plot of treachery and crime against humanity, unless Omnipotence bids us do it. If ever crime merited retribution, it is this. The supreme authority of this nation, clothed with justice, ought to take to itself all the energies of a united people and with swift retribution crush this conspiracy to the earth! There may be defeats and humiliations before us, but we will not despair. Our nation's defeat at Fort Sumpter shall prove the nation's victory and salvation. We will not lose our trust in God. After He shall have tried us and

taught us the value of our heritage by sacrifices for it, and brought us to feel our dependence upon Him, He will vindicate his own cause. He will not suffer the World to look upon the greatest iniquity of the ages crowned with success, nor compel the friends of religion and humanity in all time to come, to wonder and stumble at such a mystery of Providence, and drop their tears over the darkest page of history!

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